

**Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)**

**Oral History Interview**

Interviewee: Norman Bezanson

Interviewer: Winston Gereluk

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Index: International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers - Northwest Industries - Wardair - Ferguson Supply - automotive shops - PWA strike - Jim Shewchuk - Neil Reimer - Jack Hampson - Manning government

My name is Norman Bezanson. I was involved for several years, starting in 1955, with the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers. I was Secretary for one year and President for about 5 years of my local. Then, following that, I was a business representative for 4 years and served for roughly 22 years as a Grand Lodge representative on the international staff.

I was born in a small community on the eastern shore of Nova Scotia. My father spent most of his life in the lumber mills, and elsewhere in the lumber field. Were we well to do? Certainly not! In my early growth in the 30s, I don't think anyone was well off in my area, outside of some of the major employers. I started working when I was still 15 in a lumber camp. In 1949, early '49, I went into an aircraft plant as a green apprentice. That was Thera Aviation at that time. During that period there were about 52 of us, and we formed a union there, and then the Machinists' Union came in. I left that plant in September of '53, got married and came to Alberta. I've been here ever since. When we were thinking of getting married, my wife was living in Detroit, and I wasn't going to go there. I'm not particularly sure that she was going to come back to Nova Scotia, but this seemed like a good compromise. That's probably the short explanation.

I came out to Alberta with the promise of a job at Northwest Industries, a big aircraft overhauling repair business at that time. Unfortunately, when we got here, there was a major layoff going on, so that prospect disappeared very quickly. That was in '53, and I went to work on an oil rig until the end of December of '54. Then Northwest acquired a number of contracts, and there was work to do, so I went in there. My first working days were at the beginning of '55.

In the seismograph field in the oilfields at that time, there wasn't any union. But I had been a member in Nova Scotia prior to coming out here. As a result, I immediately joined the Machinists Union after going to work at Northwest.

I became the Recording Secretary for the Union two months after joining, because the other one had resigned. I didn't even know that, constitutionally, I was supposed to be a member for at least a year before I held office. Obviously nobody else was too concerned. I served in that capacity for a year and a half. Following that, I became president of the local. Oh yes, it followed naturally.

There was a gap of about 4 years where we didn't have anyone working full time for the Union in this province. When it was decided to open a district here, however, I was asked if I would run for the position of District Business Representative, and I agreed to. But under our regulations, there had to be someone from each of the locals involved in the district that put a person's name forward. It was rather strange, because out of one of the locals, an individual indicated he was running but he wasn't sure he wanted the job. The individual from the other local was an old friend of mine, and an older member. When he made his pitch it was based on why they should vote for me. So it was rather a difficult election to lose.

I was grand lodge representative which, in most organizations, would make me either a national or an international representative. The appointments were made by the headquarters, by the executive council, while the business representatives are elected positions. International staff, however, were all appointed.

I never ran into any major problems personally, in that position, nor do I think did most of the membership. Of course in any organization you'll always get some people or groups that feel you should do something different than what you were doing. But we've been, in some ways, rather distinctive in Canada. We had a Canadian director, a Canadian head office, and I can say that the affairs in Canada were run out of that office. I think that it would be a rather extraordinary circumstance where the international would step in and say, "You can't do this or you can't do that." We've never really had any major movement in the direction of an independent Canadian Union.

One of the major things that stands out in any Alberta trade unionist's memory in this province - and it did not involve my own union - would be the Gainer strike; that was history making. Within my own organization, there was always a lot of organizing going on in this part of the country, which changed the course of events for a lot of people. Personally, I suppose the one that more readily comes to mind is Wardair - when there still was a Wardair. I was fortunate enough to be able to organize the maintenance people, both with the charter airline and their operation out of Yellowknife in the North. They were two separate organizations. There were some rather heated negotiations that took place, but we did come out of them with some pretty decent agreements. I would say that Max Ward himself was not an unreasonable person to deal with, when you compare him to many other employers. However, some of the people in lesser positions whom we met in connection to union business left something to be desired.

As Machinists, we were in of course in the airline and aircraft repair, maintenance industry quite heavily. Another business in that field that I was personally involved in organizing was Field Aviation out of Calgary. That was one of those weird situations where most overhaul and repair places were governed by provincial jurisdiction, while airlines themselves were governed by federal jurisdiction. I organized one plant in which I suppose there'd be in the vicinity of 100 people at that time. The company challenged the organizing on the basis that it should have been a federal rather than a provincial application - and they won. Within about two weeks, we had the group signed up again, this time for a federal application. So I guess from the company's point of view it was a rather hollow victory. It cost them a great deal in legal fees and the end result was the same.

The Machinists also had a lot of membership in truck shops, heavy equipment shops, manufacturing, that sort of thing. In this province, one of my own organizing ventures was Fergusson Supply, which was the firm that had the equipment dealership for International Harvester trucks, as well as the Cummins diesel shops both in Edmonton and Calgary, Mac Trucks. You could get wound up on these things and be not sure just where to stop. Canville pipe manufacturer out here in east Edmonton was also one that I organized. I also spent a lot of what would eventually be wasted time organizing in the automotive shops, but the only place where we were ever really successful in organizing in the automotive shops was in Red Deer. When we went in there and signed up the majority of shops in Red Deer, they were one of the lower-wage and substandard condition automotive areas in the province. When we left about 5 years later, they were at the top of the heap. The membership simply said, there isn't anything more you can do for us. We're up there now, so goodbye!

I think probably the worst situation I dealt with in the early years was the Manning government which was still in power in this province. Employers committed what would even under weak legislation be considered unfair labor practices, but you had to prove beyond any kind of a doubt that this had been done, and that was often almost impossible to do. So personally I got to the point that if I was making an application to certify, before I took that into the labor relations board, I'd take a letter to the employer telling him that this was being done. So there was none of this, "Well I didn't know this happened when I fired so many people. I didn't know there was a union on the scene." And if a campaign was going to be a lengthy one, sometime early in the campaign I'd notify the employer. This may seem very stupid to many committed trade unionists, but I know it saved a number of people from being fired.

I think one of the major satisfactions from a personal point of view was Wardair. Because that was where they involved some rather high-priced lawyers in that situation. They would simply inform us that this is that this or that was going to happen, "We have this and you don't." We have something else and you don't. When we would listen to this for about an hour, we would finally say, "But I have the one thing you don't. I have 150 damned mad employees and they're going to close the place down". And, invariably, we would get an agreement.

Another one that I remember fondly was when we first organized Fergusson Supply, the heavy equipment dealer. That was a battle. It was practically sworn that they would never sign an agreement, but eventually they did, and after that, we had a reasonable working relationship. We had a strike or two there over the years, but nothing too serious. To begin with, there were 14 people fired. This was when things really started booming in the oil sands, several years ago in the late '60s early '70s when things were starting to go out there. Heavy equipment dealers could sell equipment to anyone. There was a cry for it and there was very little supply. The argument they used was business was getting too big for us, we want to go back to a little family business. We had no idea that there was a union on the scene when we let these people go. However, one of the employees that was fired, who happened to be at the labor relations board hearings, spoke up and said, yes you did, I told you. We did get all 14 people back at work. It worked out quite well. The relationship was not bad afterwards.

Yes, I remember one manufacturing shop in Calgary that signed the people up almost 100%. The employer challenged it on the basis that the employees were unduly influenced, under the influence of liquor at the time they signed up. The Board agreed with them, because a couple of the employees got up and said, yest most of them had been in the bar all afternoon. Well they weren't, at least most of them weren't. But I was naïve or stupid, whatever you want to call it, because during the meeting, one individual was constantly butting in on everyone. I just assumed he had an unreasonably big mouth, but I guess he was boozed. The certification got thrown out because of that. Strangely enough there was a vote, and although we had a relatively small shop, we had about 35 people signed up out of about 40. However, I think that when the vote came, we got 5 votes. They had done a real good job.

I think the biggest losses I personally endured were in the automotive industry, and in the automotive shops specifically. We signed a number of shops up in Calgary and a majority up in Lethbridge. The negotiations, however, dragged out for very lengthy periods of time. They'd take you to a strike vote and no one would turn out to vote - not only fail to support you. Whether they were that afraid or what, I don't know. I think most automotive mechanics, being on flat rate, are the last of the great free enterprisers. It's a venture I would never advise anybody else to get into again.

The last strike I had was probably 15 years ago with PWA, when it still was PWA. The membership was rock solid in that one. It went on for quite a period of time. You never get everything you're hoping to get, and such was the case there, but it was a tremendously solid group.

There have been frustrating situations. There have been organizing campaigns where you realized at a later date that you had not done everything you should have done, or you did something you should not have done, which created a failure. And you 'tied that can to your own tail'. There are those situations, and of course, there have been a few negotiations where many months later, you really wondered if you had left something on the table.

One person that I always had a particularly high regard for, almost from the day I first came into the labor movement in Alberta, was Jim Shewchuk. I had a tremendous amount of respect for Jim. Jim Shewchuk, who in my early days in the labor movement, was the president of the Edmonton District Labor Council. Then in later years he went on to become the Canadian Labor Council representative out of Calgary. I don't think Jim ever denied anyone assistance if they wanted it, or anything he was able to do for them. You always knew you got straight answers. I guess at Jim's death, I felt sort of a sense of personal loss, because he was not only in my opinion a top flight trade unionist, he was a good and decent person.

I suppose another who fortunately is still quite active would be Neil Reimer. I've always had a tremendous respect for Neil Reimer. I think Neil again was someone that was always above board. The type of person, he didn't say something to you and something else about you - and that wasn't always true in the labor movement, as in any other walk of life. There were others. I had a great admiration for Jack Hampson when he was president of the Alberta Federation of Labor. This would have still been in the '50s when Jack was the president. He had been a long time representative with the United Packing

House workers. I always found, I was quite young in the labor movement at that time, and I always found Jack as somebody you could sit down over a sandwich with and get a great deal of information, get a great deal of history of what had happened during his period in the labor movement. He would always give you a little bit of advice about what you should do in a given circumstance and what you definitely shouldn't do. I suppose it was, I guess maybe our conversations due to age difference were father son conversations almost. Because Jack was a lot of years older than I was. Oh there have been so many people that I have had high regard for in the labor movement. And very few that have been at the other extreme, and those I would rather not get into.

When I started actively in the labor movement, it was still during the Manning years, the Manning government. The legislation that Ernest Manning was responsible for was bad, and even with the legislation we had, it was just not enforced - it was almost impossible to get it enforced. I do think that in the very early Lougheed years there was a considerable improvement. Not that it was easy, not that it was great, or not that Peter Lougheed was labor's best friend, but at least you could talk to him. In the last several years, unfortunately the wheel has turned full circle and the present legislation and the present enforcement of the legislation, as I read it no longer being active, is as bad as anything that took place during the Manning years.

I suppose that it really doesn't matter how rough things to, you can't give up. There isn't anywhere else to go. What are the choices? Sure you can go home at night cursing at yourself and at the world, but in the morning you've got to start all over again.